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PROGRAM CBS Morning News

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SUBJECT Interview with David Martin

BILL KURTIS: Last night CBS News reported that US intelligence officials have evidence linking the government of Iran to the deadly bombing of the US embassy in Beirut -- Beirut, Lebanon -- last month.

That report was by Pentagon correspondent David Martin, who is with us this morning in Washington. Good morning, David.

DAVID MARTIN: Good morning.

KURTIS: I think the obvious followup question is, if we knew of the cables, knew of the link between Tehran and the bombing -- or a bombing -- why wasn't better security available at the US embassy in Beirut?

MARTIN: Bill, I don't think there's a good answer to that question.

The United States government should have taken greater precautions in response to the intelligence it had; and the fact that it didn't makes you wonder why we spend all the money we do spend on collecting intelligence in the first place.

To be fair, you have to say that these cables which were describing some of the preparations which the Iranian government was making, did not specifically say that there was going to be an attack against the American embassy in Beirut. They simply referred to a major attack soon to occur in Beirut.

But I think it's fair to say that the American embassy in Beirut was such a prime target for a terrorist attack that the US should have taken greater precautions in response to the warnings it had.

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KURTIS: And perhaps alert our allies and other embassies.

MARTIN: That's right, because, as a matter of fact the original warnings which occurred quite some time before the attack had been much more generalized and had referred to attacks against either Israeli, British or French installations.

KURTIS: Let's assume for the moment that this is good evidence and look ahead, what do we do about it now?

MARTIN: Well, there's not a lot you can do with the Iranians; there's not much left in that relationship to sever or alter in any way.

I think the -- the more important question and the more interesting question is what do we do with regard to Syria, because there is a school of thought which says that the Iranian government could not have staged this operation through Damascus, Syria, without the knowledge and consent of the Syrian government. And more specifically, without the knowledge and consent of Refat Assad (?) who is the chief of Syrian intelligence, and also the brother of Hafez Assad, the ruler of Syria.

Now that's sort of a guilt by association and at the moment I don't think that is strong enough evidence for the US to justify altering or severing relations with Syria.

So I guess the short answer is there's not much we can do.

KURTIS: Another short answer before we go.

Aren't we, in effect, giving away some intelligence secrets simply by admitting that we have the ability to intercept these cables?

MARTIN: If we had been the first to report that, yes. But that fact had been reported by Jack Anderson about a week ago. What we provided last night were the details of the intercepted communications.

KURTIS: David Martin, thanks very much for a followup on your break last night.